



# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

## news release

### Fish and Wildlife Service

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### 21 PEOPLE CHARGED IN ARIZONA CACTUS POACHING CASE

Secretary of the Interior Manuel Lujan today announced that 21 people have been charged with felony criminal violations involving illegal collection and trafficking in saguaro cactus, in the largest Federal case ever involving protected plants.

The charges are the result of a 4-year undercover investigation based in Arizona and conducted by special agents of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, in cooperation with the Arizona Commission of Agriculture and Horticulture. The individuals were arrested by Federal wildlife agents this morning and charged with stealing or illegally collecting saguaro cacti, including rare, fan-shaped "crested" plants, on Federal, state, and private land in Arizona for resale to nurseries, collectors, and residential property owners.

"This action demonstrates that the Federal Government takes very seriously its responsibility to protect plants," Lujan said. "The saguaro cactus is a cherished part of our western landscape. The saguaros that grow on Federal and state lands belong to the American people, and those who collect them illegally are stealing from the public for their own personal profit."

"The Fish and Wildlife Service is determined to end the pillaging of this irreplaceable part of the desert ecosystem," said Service Director John Turner.

Stephen M. McNamee, U.S. Attorney for the District of Arizona, said, "Arizona's unique resources, like the saguaro cactus, need the diligent protection we are providing. Those who attempt to illegally exploit these resources face severe penalties."

The saguaro cactus, the state plant of Arizona, is found principally in the Sonoran Desert in southern Arizona and is known for its large size and the distinctive "arms" which branch from the main body of the plant. Rare, "crested" saguaros--of which only about 200 are estimated to exist in the wild--feature branches across the top in a broad, fan shape. Saguaro cacti can grow to about 40 feet tall and weigh as much as 6 or 7 tons. Because they grow very slowly, large plants may be 150 to 175 years old.

(over)

Saguaros are protected under Arizona's native plant law and under the Federal Lacey Act, which prohibits interstate trafficking in plants and animals collected in violation of state law. Along with other cacti, the saguaro is included on Appendix II of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora which regulates trade in species that may be jeopardized by international commerce.

The State of Arizona permits collection of saguaros in danger of destruction from construction projects, but only after Arizona officials determine through a survey that salvageable plants can be taken from the property. State permits limit the number of plants that can be collected and restrict the collection to specific areas. Each saguaro collected must be tagged.

The individuals in this case are alleged to have removed saguaros illegally from vast, hard-to-patrol Federal and state lands, and in some cases from private property. The cactus collectors work mainly at night and can dig up and move a large, several-ton saguaro within 15 or 20 minutes. Healthy plants sell for up to \$50 a foot plus an additional \$100 per arm, and prized "crested" plants can sell for as much as \$15,000.

While not Federally listed as an endangered species, saguaro cacti require protection from illegal collection because of their vulnerability to loss or damage from vandalism, development, off-road vehicles, and air pollution, and because of their slow reproduction and rate of growth, which have made nursery propagation difficult. A saguaro does not begin to reproduce until it is 50 to 75 years old. The seeds are eaten by birds, mammals, and insects; seeds that do germinate grow very slowly, perhaps only an inch in the first 10 years, making them susceptible to loss from both natural causes and human impacts.

The charges against the subjects include theft of Federal property, conspiracy, and violations of the Lacey Act. Each theft of Federal property charge carries a maximum penalty of 10 years imprisonment and/or a \$250,000 fine, while the felony Lacey Act and conspiracy charges carry a maximum penalty of 5 years imprisonment and/or a \$250,000 fine. Several defendants also have been charged with misdemeanor violations of the Lacey Act with maximum penalties of 1 year imprisonment and/or a \$100,000 fine.

The case is being prosecuted with the assistance of the Department of Justice, Land and Natural Resources Division.



Saguaro cacti can live to be 150 to 175 years old and weigh as much as 6 or 7 tons. Saguaro "poachers" work mostly at night and can dig up and remove a large cactus within 15 minutes. National Park Service photo.